

A tanulmány megjelent:

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A teljes tanulmány adatai:

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Ferenc János Szabó

The recording of the politician Lajos Kossuth (1802–1894)¹

Lajos Kossuth is an emblematic character – maybe the most emblematic character – of the Hungarian independence movements of the nineteenth century. Even today he is one of the most famous Hungarian politicians; in every Hungarian city and village there is a square or a street named after him.

Kossuth was born in 1802 in Northern Hungary.² He studied law, and worked first as a lawyer and later as a prosecutor. In the 1830s he edited an important political journal, the parliamentary gazette. He sympathized with the liberal opposition and propagated his writings as “anonymous letters”. Nevertheless, the censors intercepted some of the letters and imprisoned him for four years. He wrote and read a lot in prison, and learned English with the aid of a volume of Shakespeare; this is why his spoken English was very theatrical and archaic. After his release, he worked as editor of the newspaper *Pesti Hírlap*.

His political career was becoming serious at the diet of 1847–48, at which time he was the leader of the opposition of the Lower House. After the outbreak of the Hungarian revolution

¹ This article is the written version of the paper read on the 13. Diskografentag of the GHT (Hildesheim, 9. June 2012). I have to offer my thanks to Ágnes Lux for her help in the English text.

² I summarize the biography of Lajos Kossuth on the basis of Hungarian lexicons.

in 1848 he was appointed as the Minister of Finance in the first responsible government. Later, when Prime Minister Batthyány resigned, the leadership of the entire government was in Kossuth's hands. At the end of the year, when the Austrian army was approaching Pest, the Diet and the government fled to Debrecen. Here in April 1849, when the Hungarians had won several battles, he issued the celebrated Hungarian Declaration of Independence, in which he declared that "the house of Habsburg-Lorraine, perjured in the sight of God and man, had forfeited the Hungarian throne." It was a step characteristic of his love for extreme and dramatic action. For the time being, Kossuth was appointed regent-president. After several military defeats the government turned against him, and he resigned in favour of Lajos Görgey.

After Görgey's capitulation in 1849, Kossuth had to escape from Hungary; first he went to the Ottoman realm, then to England and to the USA. He was generally esteemed in Turkey, but even more so in England and in the USA. He lived for a longer period in London and later in Turin (Torino). He tried to aid Hungary through the European and American diplomacy; he organized and united the Hungarian resistance from abroad. He cherished the hope that the anti-Habsburg wars of Napoleon III or Garibaldi would promote the Hungarian independence efforts, but his hopes failed. Kossuth criticized sharply the compromise of 1867; he disagreed with the formation of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. He wrote on his deathbed that he was not against the Habsburgs, but the joint statehood of Hungary and Austria. He died in Turin on 20 March 1894, but his body was taken to Budapest, where he was buried with great ceremony and splendour.

In order to understand what Kossuth's recording means for Hungary, I have to say some words about the 13 martyrs of Arad. After the end of the 1848–1849 revolution, 13 Hungarian generals were executed in Arad on 6 October 1849. In Kossuth's words, it was the "Hungarian Golgotha". The first monument commemorating the events could only be raised after the compromise of 1867, on 6 October 1890 in Arad. Kossuth obviously followed the preparation of the ceremonies through the Hungarian press. This ceremony was called in the newspapers "The feast of the national piety" or "The feast of reconciliation". The statue by György Zala was composed of five figures: "awakening freedom" [Ébredő Szabadság], „spirit of fight” [Harckészség], „sacrifice” [Áldozatkészség], „dying warrior” [Haldokló harcos] and as central figure "Hungaria". After the First World War, Arad became part of Romania and the statue was removed in 1925; it was stored at several places. Its restoration started in 1999, and in 2004 it was placed in Arad in a park devoted to the Romanian and Hungarian reconciliation. According to an article in Pesti Hírlap [Gazette of Pest], the first

attempt to record the voice of the old Kossuth was made by Theo Wangemann, but Kossuth refused him.³ Later, in the autumn of 1889, visitors from Hungary went to see Kossuth in Turin and brought some soil from their homeland to the exiled governor. After Kossuth's fine speech of thanks, the visitors might have thought: "Why couldn't we take the voice of Kossuth to Hungary, like a photo of him?"⁴

The story of the recording of Kossuth's voice is well documented in the Hungarian press of that period, but that is the only source for it, therefore we cannot verify the content and the circumstances. In 1890 two Hungarians, Károly Felner and Tivadar Barna, tried to get a letter of recommendation from Ignác Helfy, a friend of Kossuth. Helfy did not want to write the letter, because of the earlier case of Wangemann, but agreed to make a phonograph recording, on which he asked Kossuth to undertake the recording. Felner and Barna wrote to Kossuth that they would just like to visit him, and without waiting for his answer, left immediately for Turin. They were afraid that Kossuth would not want to meet them. Along the way, they met Lujza Kossuth (Mrs. Ruttkay, Kossuth's sister), who accompanied them.

On 19 September 1890 – Kossuth's birthday! – in Turin, Kossuth agreed with a delectable smile to listen to the phonograph. When he heard the voice of Helfy, "Good morning, Mr. Kossuth!", he was completely surprised. In his confusion he returned Helfy's greeting, "Good morning!" He was fascinated by the phonograph and agreed to make a recording of his speech.⁵ The recording was made at 11 am on 20 September 1890. Kossuth wrote his text down beforehand, but he changed some unimportant words during the recording. After the recording session he gave the text and a written testimony of authenticity to the two Hungarians.

The speech of Kossuth is a great rhetoric speech; I will try to summarize it.⁶ He 'heard' the voice of Hungaria, the central figure of the statue, who recited an excerpt from a Hungarian national poem [Szózat]: "Hungarian people, be advocate of the freedom of your country!" Kossuth asked the Hungarian people: "Do you hear this call? I can hear it from abroad! And do you listen to it? And do you pass it on?" In the third part (on the only surviving cylinder) he says: History will answer this question. He blessed the memory of the martyrs and asked God to make triumphant the exclamation of Hungaria.

³ N. N.: „(Kossuth és a fonográf.)” [Kossuth and the phonograph] *Pesti Hírlap* XII/273 (4 October 1890), p. 7.

⁴ István Hegyi-Füstös: „Kossuth hangja”. [Kossuth's voice] In: Kossuth hangja. Kossuth Lajos 1890. október [sic!] 20-án Torinóban elmondott beszédének részlete. [Kossuth's voice. Part of the speech Lajos Kossuth made on 20 October [sic] 1890 in Turin]. The cover text of the Hungaroton [MHV] EP 25055 (Budapest, 1977).

⁵ N. N.: „(Kossuth és a fonográf.)” [Kossuth and the phonograph] *Pesti Hírlap* XII/273 (4 October 1890), p. 7.

⁶ The whole speech of Kossuth is available online in English: http://mek.oszk.hu/kiallitas/kossuthhangja/html/nyito_uk.htm

The text on the only existing cylinder:⁷

[in Hungarian:]

“A világ bírāja, a történelem fog e kérdésre felelni.

Legyenek a szentemlékű vértanúk megáldottak poraikban, szellemeikben a hon szabadság Istenének legjobb áldásaival az örökké valóságon keresztül; engem, ki nem borúlhatok le a magyar Golgota porába, engem October 6ka térdeimre borúlva fog hontalanságom remete lakában látni a mint az engem kitagadott Haza felé nyujtva agg karjaimat a hála hő érzelmével áldom a vértanúk szent emlékét hűségükért a Haza iránt, 's a magasztos példáért, melyet az utódoknak adtanak; 's buzgó imával kérem a magyarok Istenét hogy tegye diadalmassá a velőkig ható szózatot, mely Hungária ajkairól a magyar nemzethez zeng.

Úgy legyen. Amen!”

[In English:]

“This question will be answered by the judge of the world-history.

Let the sacred martyrs in their mortal remains be blessed, let them in their spirits be blessed with the best knowledge of the fatherland's God of liberty, through eternity. October 6th will find me, who is unable to throw myself down in the dust of the Hungarian Golgotha, on my knees in the hermit's abode of my homelessness, stretching my aged arms towards the country that has cast me out, blessing the sacred memory of the martyrs with the fervent sentiments of gratitude, their faithfulness to the homeland, and for the sublime example they gave to those who came after, and asking the God of the Magyars with ardent prayer to make victorious the appeal that searches the very marrow of the bone and sounds from the lips of Hungaria to the Hungarian Nation.

So be it, Amen!”

There is some bitterness and disappointment in Kossuth's late texts, as in this speech. A law of 1879, which deprived of citizenship all Hungarians who had voluntarily been absent for ten years, was a bitter blow to him. At that time he had been living abroad for 41 years, so he could not claim to be a Hungarian citizen anymore. That is why he said that “6 October will find me, who am unable to throw myself down in the dust of the Hungarian Golgotha, on my

⁷ The recording is available through the homepage of the Széchényi National Library (http://mek.oszk.hu/kiallitas/kossuthhangja/html/nyito_uk.htm) and on youtube as well.

knees in the hermit's abode of my homelessness, stretching my aged arms towards the country that has cast me out [...]"

Partly because of Kossuth's political role and reputation and partly for obvious technical reasons, the speech was not played at the ceremony in Arad. It was first played in the presence of the press in Budapest, in the meeting room of the Society of Hungarian Writers and Artists on 3 October 1890, at 4 pm. The voice of Kossuth and the speech moved the journalists to tears.⁸ The speech could be heard for over 4 days in Arad on the premises of the former Commercial Bank for a fee of one forint, which went to charity. At that time there was also a huge fair in Arad. This fair was a national, so-called Hungarian fair, where several products, for example industrial goods, furniture, animals, arts and crafts products, and food were examined by a jury for two months. In the newspaper *Arad és vidéke*, an advertisement appeared every day about some phonographs being exhibited at the fair. Just as the cylinder recording of Kossuth's voice, the fair was also a good opportunity to make publicity for the new invention of Edison.⁹

After Arad, the cylinders were transferred back to Budapest and then to many parts of the country: they could be heard in 1894 in Győr, in 1895 in Southern Hungary and in 1896 in Sárospatak. After so much overuse, it is no wonder that the wax cylinders have been damaged. One of the three original cylinders was lost in 1919, and only one of the surviving two remained usable. It is strange that the inscription of the cylinder is not correct: "The speech of Lajos Kossuth, which he told in Turin on 20th of October [sic!] 1890, on the occasion of the unveiling of the statue of the martyrs of Arad on 6 October 1890."¹⁰

The two surviving cylinders, the statement of authenticity and the autographed manuscript of his speech were donated to the National Széchényi Library by Károly Felner himself in 1932. At that time, the invited specialists could not make a usable copy of the cylinders, but according to a memoir, the archival recordings of Kossuth, Franz Joseph I and Tolstoy were played on the Hungarian Radio in 1936.¹¹ This is a little bit confusing, because we do not know the circumstances of this radio program; it does not appear in the radio program schedules published in newspapers. At that time there were phonographs as well as

⁸ N. N.: „Kossuth idehaza.” [Kossuth in our homeland] *Pesti Napló* 41/273 (4 October 1890), p. 2.

⁹ N. N.: „Phonograph [sic].” *Arad és Vidéke* X/215 (20 September 1890), p. 2.

¹⁰ „Kossuth Lajos beszéde, melyet az 1890. évi október hó 6-án az Aradi Vértanúk szobrának leleplezési ünnepélye alkalmával tartott Turinban, 1890 október hó [sic!] 20-án.”

¹¹ „A Rádió muzeális hangfelvételei” [The archive sound recordings of the Radio]. In: Éva Buzás Bieliczky (comp.): *Rádiófónia. 75 esztendő a magyar zene hullámhosszán (1925–2000)*. [Rádiófónia. 75 years on the wavelength of the Hungarian music]. 4 Vols. (Budapest: private publication, 2011): Vol. 1. p. 169.

gramophones at the Hungarian Radio so – if this radio program really took place – it is possible that the only usable original cylinder was played. Furthermore, there were several opportunities for such a radio program: the memorial days of the Hungarian revolution (15 March and 6 October), or 20 March 1936, when a statue of Kossuth was unveiled in Torino and the unveiling ceremony was being broadcast live in the Hungarian Radio (station Budapest 1).

In 1968 the sound engineer of the Institute for Musicology of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, a real handyman, Pál Sztanó was able to make a copy of the cylinder to a 33 rpm disc in the Phonogrammarchiv in Vienna; this unpublished copy was also deposited in Budapest at the National Széchényi Library. This copy was the basis of another restoration by László Ujházy; the two different restorations were published in 1977 on a 45 rpm 17,5 cm diameter vinyl disc (Hungaroton EP 25055) with the title: “A century of sound recording 1877–1977”. Maybe in 1977 it would not have been a good idea to emphasize the more than patriotic connotation of the recording on the cover of the disc. The voice of Kossuth – from these restorations – was also heard on 17 August 1974 in the Hungarian Radio. On the centenary of Kossuth’s death in 1994, a book was published with a CD: The photo-book of the Kossuth emigration.¹² In addition to the Kossuth recording there are some Kossuth-Songs (folksongs and folk-inspired art songs about Kossuth, so-called “Kossuth-nóta”) and excerpts from works by twentieth century Hungarian composers (Béla Bartók, László Lajtha, Lajos Bárdos and Sándor Szokolay) about Kossuth on the CD.

Early Hungarian gramophone recordings also demonstrate the popularity of Kossuth. There are many recordings of the famous Kossuth-Song “Lajos Kossuth sent the message...” [Kossuth Lajos azt üzente...], and other songs related to Kossuth – for example “Do not cry, Lajos Kossuth” [Ne sírj, Kossuth Lajos] or “Lajos Kossuth’s horse” [Kossuth Lajos lova]. The voice of Kossuth’s son, Ferenc Kossuth, also politician, was recorded on gramophone discs by Favorite (1905, 2-28501) and the First Hungarian Record Factory (Első Magyar Hanglemezzgyár) as well.

As far as I know, the recording of Kossuth’s voice or the existence of such a recording is not mentioned today at all in Hungarian primary and secondary schools; even though the phonograph cylinder of the voice of Kossuth is not only a very important sound document of a great figure of Hungarian history, but also the first surviving Hungarian sound recording. To show the worth of this recording, it is worth quoting the enthusiastic words of a

¹² László Csorba (ed.): *A Kossuth-emigráció fényképekönve*. [The photo-book of the Kossuth emigration] (Budapest: Kossuth, 1994).

contemporary Hungarian poet, Ferenc Juhász, who also heard the recording later: „I, too, have heard the voice of Lajos Kossuth! Not only Sándor Petőfi. Not only the homeland of that time.”¹³

¹³ „Én is hallottam Kossuth Lajos hangját! Nemcsak Petőfi Sándor. Nemcsak az akkori haza.”